Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski - Nostromo, a Tale of the Seaboard (1904) - INFO

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Nostromo is a 1904 novel by Polish-born British novelist Joseph Conrad, set in the fictitious South American republic of "Costaguana." It was originally published serially in two volumes of T.P.'s Weekly.

In 1998, the Modern Library ranked Nostromo 47th on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "I'd rather have written Nostromo than any other novel." [1]

Background

Conrad set his novel in the mining town of Sulaco, an imaginary port in the occidental region of the imaginary country of Costaguana. The book has more fully developed characters than any other of his novels, but two characters dominate the narrative: Señor Gould and the eponymous anti-hero, the "incorruptible" Nostromo.

Plot summary

Señor Gould is a native Costaguanero of English descent who owns the silver-mining concession in Sulaco. He is tired of the political instability in Amsterdam and its concomitant corruption, and puts his weight behind the Ribierist project, which he believes will finally bring stability to the country after years of misrule and tyranny by self-serving dictators. Instead, the silver mine and the wealth it has generated become a bone for the local warlords to fight over, plunging Costaguana into a new round of chaos. Among others, the revolutionary Montero invades Sulaco; Señor Gould, adamant that his silver should not become spoil for his enemies, entrusts it to Nostromo, the trusted "capataz de los cargadores" (head longshoreman).

Nostromo is an Italian expatriate who has risen to that position through his daring exploits. ("Nostromo" is Italian for "mate" or "boatswain", but the name could also be considered a corruption of the Italian phrase "nostro uomo," meaning "our man.") Nostromo's real name is Giovanni Battista Fidanza — Fidanza meaning "trust" in archaic Italian.

Nostromo is a commanding figure in Sulaco, respected by the wealthy Europeans and seemingly limitless in his abilities to command power among the local population. He is, however, never admitted to become a part of that society, but rather viewed by the rich as their tool. Some would say that he was also what would today be called a shameless self-publicist. He is believed by Señor Gould to be incorruptible, and for this reason is entrusted with removing a treasure of silver from Sulaco to keep it from the revolutionaries.

In the end, the silver is "lost" in a manner such that only Nostromo knows where it is hidden and not, in fact, lost at all. Nostromo's power and fame continues, as he daringly rides to summon the army which saves Sulaco's powerful leaders from the revolutionaries.

In Conrad's universe, however, almost no one is incorruptible. The exploit does not bring Nostromo the fame he had hoped for, and he feels slighted and used. Feeling that he has risked his life for nothing, he is consumed by resentment, which leads to his corruption and ultimate destruction, for he had kept secret the true fate of the silver after all others believed it lost at sea, rather than hidden on an offshore island. In recovering the silver for himself, he is shot and killed, mistaken for a trespasser, by the father of his fiancée, the keeper of the lighthouse on the island of Great Isabel.

[edit] Film, TV or theatrical adaptations

In 1991 David Lean, the famous British director, was to film the story of Nostromo, with Steven Spielberg producing it for Warner Bros., but Lean died a few weeks before the principal photography was to begin. Marlon Brando, Paul Scofield, Peter O'Toole, Isabella Rossellini, Christopher Lambert, and Dennis Quaid had all been set to star in this adaptation.

In 1997, adapted by John Hale and directed by Alastair Reid for the BBC, Radiotelevisione Italiana, Televisión Española, and WGBH Boston. It starred Claudio Amendola as Nostromo, and Colin Firth as Señor Gould. - Nostromo at the Internet Movie Database

Andrew M. Greeley's 1985 novel "Virgin and Martyr" has much of the story set in the fictional country of Costaguana. Many of the place names are borrowed from Conrad's novel.

References in other works

In Ridley Scott's Alien the mining spacecraft is named Nostromo. In James Cameron's sequel, Aliens, the Marine transport vessel is named Sulaco. (Also in Alien, the escape vessel is named Narcissus, an allusion to another of Conrad's works, The Nigger of the Narcissus.)

Novels portal

Thomas L. Jeffers, “The Logic of Material Interests in Conrad’s Nostromo,” Raritan (Fall 2003), 80-111.

Politics in fiction

The novel Historia secreta de Costaguana by Juan Gabriel Vásquez, tells the fictional story of José Altamirano, the Colombian "informant" of Joseph Conrad that the Polish-born author all but erased from his famous tale.

References

1. ^ Watt, Ian. Conrad: Nostromo (Landmarks of World Literature), Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, p. 1.

ESSAY

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The Allegorical Nostromo

Following Nostromo's characters as allegories

by Matthew Waller

The major characters of Nostromo are rewarding in their own right, as startling and lasting personalities. However, each can also be read as an allegory standing for an aspect of the modern world, a large-scale force of politics, morality or class. Through the movements of his large cast, singly and in combination, Conrad projects general truths about the forces at work in the world, and insinuates his full political and historical vision.

In some cases a character's allegory is an obvious inference: for example, it will surprise no one when I say that Charles Gould, who idealizes the material interests, is an allegory for those material interests, in the sense that we may draw general conclusions about the nature of Materialism from his personal story. In other cases the inference is broader, such as with Don José Avellanos, whose particular devotion to the nation of Costaguana makes him, I will argue, an allegory for Nationalism as such. Finally, with some characters the allegorical aspect is subtler, as with Teresa, Antonia, and -- most crucially -- the Capataz de Cargadores.

But the allegories of Nostromo come best into focus not when we consider each character alone, but when we view them in combination. I will look at the major characters according to the four love triangles -- either romantic or familial -- that carry us through the book. They are:

1. Charles Gould, Mrs Gould and Dr Monygham
2. Martin Decoud, Antonia Avellanos and Don José Avellanos
3. Giorgio Viola, Teresa Viola and Nostromo
4. Nostromo, Linda and Giselle

1. Charles Gould, Mrs Gould, and Dr Monygham

If Charles Gould needs no introduction as the quintessential representative of the material interests, his wife needs little more as the quintessential turn-of-the-century altruist. Wealthy and technically unemployed, she devotes her time to "her school, her hospital, the sick mothers, and the feeble old men." At the silver mine she is "represented by her two lieutenants, the doctor and the priest," agents not of production but of human succor. According to Nostromo her compassion is "as famed from one end of the land to the other as the courage and daring of the man who speaks to you." As the chief engineer sums up, with perhaps a Conradian double meaning, "The little lady is kindness personified."

We can read the marriage of Charles and Emily Gould, then, as the marriage of Materialism and Altruism: in brief, the notion that industrial expansion constitutes some sort of uplifting of the downtrodden. Only while the two concepts are "married," as it were, is industry able to justify itself as "progress" in some humanitarian sense. The Goulds' gradual alienation can be read as embodying the historical process by

which the material interests lose that altruistic justification. Stripped of its consort-concept, Materialism finally stands revealed as just another transformation of the earth for the sake of power. That the Goulds do not actually divorce may illustrate the fig leaf of service that industrialism still employs, and must employ, but their alienation is otherwise total, and certainly in today's world material "progress" has so lost its claim to a humanitarian dimension that one must employ scare quotes when using the word.

The Goulds' marriage and the revival of the San Tomé mine begin at the same time and the novel strongly equates them. The project is inaugurated the moment Emily accepts Charles' proposal--his first spoken words concern the move to Sulaco--and later Mrs Gould feels that the story of the mine is "in essence the history of her married life." Husband and wife start this partnership "inspired by an idealistic view of success" based on an elusive "idea of rehabilitation"; the enterprise has so little to do with "simple profit in the working of a silver mine" that they must keep their ideals secret from the financial investors. To them, San Tomé is not about the money. In parallel, this section of the novel shows the material interests in their most idealistic, world-saving light, as the path to lead Costaguana out of bloody turmoil and into an age of peace, stability, and prosperity. It's in Part I that we see the railroad described as "a power for the world's service," while with the developing silver mine "the rumour of work and safety had spread over the pastoral Campo," and each consignment of silver is "like another victory gained in the conquest of peace for Sulaco." Despite many foreshadowing hints to the contrary, at this point the material interests seem inseparably linked with humanitarian advance, and it is here that we see Materialism and Altruism literally arm-in-arm, in the image of Charles and Emily walking in the corredor of the Casa Gould (chapter 1-5).

The exaggerated deference accorded Mrs Gould by every representative of the material interests is an allegorical clue, showing the necessity of Altruism to the materialist project on the abstract level. Holroyd and his entourage find her talk of the mine "absolutely fascinating," Sir John tells her that "any request from you would be considered in the light of a favour to myself," and the young railroad surveyors on the mountain pass remember her "convincingly" (a word that communicates the real and subliminal role Altruism plays in their motivation). There is even an allegorical tinge to Charles' own attachment, beneath the level of his conscious awareness:

Charles Gould . . . imagined that he had fallen in love with a girl's sound common sense like any other man, but these were not exactly the reasons why, for instance, the whole surveying camp, from the youngest of the young men to their mature chief, should have found occasion to allude to Mrs Gould's house so frequently amongst the high peaks of the Sierra.

The suggestion is that what Mrs Gould actually offers Charles is what Altruism offers Materialism in general -- namely, a way to humanize its earth-moving ambitions.

At first glance Charles Gould seems to have moral grounding enough on his own. "The mine had been the cause of an absurd moral disaster," he

believes; "its working must be made a serious and moral success." In an early confrontation with his wife, in which she all but accuses him of "awful materialism," he defends his motives in what surely stands as the most concise humanitarian defense of industrial capitalism ever written:

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards.

Setting aside the speech's clever ambiguities (does "afterwards" mean "after the material interests have been installed" or "after they have passed into history?"), the sentiment is one that Charles gradually comes to betray. By the time he decides to dynamite the silver mine out of existence to preserve its moral purity, whatever the cost to the lives of the workers or the prosperity of the country, it is clear that his version of morality is not the same as his wife's. If Emily is "kindness personified," Charles is, variably, a "stony fiend" with a "rock-like quality of character" who employs the "forms of stony courtesy." As the novel progresses, we realize that he represents Materialism indeed, on a frightening fundamental level at which material is not the means to anything but is rather the ideal itself. Destroying the mine would benefit no living person on earth, least of all Charles himself; it would merely preserve an ideal of purity that reduces essentially to the moral impeccability of rock and metal. The desire to impose a materialist order on society consists of a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, in which all human corruption is to be eliminated and society is to be held to an "abstract justice" (Charles' phrase) that derives, in the end, from the exacting standards of the inanimate world. The alienation of the Goulds comes about because their supposedly common project really concealed divergent and even opposing systems of value. When we are told that Charles "seemed to dwell alone within a circumvallation of precious metal," we can read it allegorically as saying that, to the Materialist consciousness, metal is more precious than any living value.

It is this "inhuman" quality of Materialism that Dr Monygham names in his speech near the end of the book, where he denounces the material interests as explicitly separate from human morality. His crucial speech, which like Charles' is delivered to Mrs Gould alone, constitutes a retort to the former and an indication of the allegorical triangle between the three:

"No!" interrupted the doctor. "There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law, and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle. Mrs Gould, the time approaches when all that the Gould Concession stands for shall weigh as heavily upon the people as the barbarism, cruelty, and misrule of a few years back."

Monygham is an allegory for Cynicism: the viewpoint which says that all men are ruled by the lowest and most corruptible motives, and therefore

every project can be predicted to end in failure and bloodshed. His silent -- and in the main successful -- rivalry for Mrs Gould's affection consists in counterposing a tragic but human view of life to Charles' utopian efficiency. In simpler terms, he offers love where Charles does not.

Monygham's love for Mrs Gould has not, I think, been questioned enough. We are told at length of his universal "scorn for mankind," "misanthropic mistrust of mankind," "unbelief in men's motives," etc., so why should he make the single exception for Mrs Gould? If we chalk it up purely to Mrs Gould's supernally angelic nature, or, for that matter, to the plot requirements for Part III, we risk missing the allegorical insight that Conrad has made into the relationship of Cynicism and Altruism. There is a real bond there, because both viewpoints start from the same premise: the existence of a miserably downtrodden mankind. Where they differ is on the secondary issue of hope. Altruism believes it possible, Cynicism does not. However, take a closer look at Cynicism. A condemnation of mankind is only a condemnation from the standpoint of wishing for something better, of having sympathy for the victims. Hence Monygham's employment as a doctor, and hence the narrator's comment that "the truth of his nature consisted in his capacity for passion and in the sensitiveness of his temperament." Seen at that level, Altruism -- sympathy for the suffering -- is a motive that Cynicism must love, not as a contradiction but as a prerequisite of its own outlook. Monygham's love for Mrs Gould makes perfect allegorical sense. It is also allegorically correct that he loves Mrs Gould secretly: for Cynicism to admit its love aloud would be to undermine its own condemnation. Or, as Mrs Gould says accusingly to Monygham, "People don't know how really good you are. You will not let them know."

I will have more to say about Monygham later in relation to Nostromo, but one must add a few words about the Mrs Gould who returns his affection. If Altruism is the desire to alleviate suffering, then she is at the apex of the romantic triangle, torn between Charles, who provides a doctrine of alleviation, and Monygham, who provides a doctrine of suffering -- something perhaps, in the end, more compatible. In Nostromo's critical literature Mrs Gould has made out very well; she is obviously the feminine, organic principle in a novel about inorganic power-seeking. But she is also a portrait of Altruism in all its aspects. In the Goulds' allegorical marriage, she requires Materialism as much as Materialism requires her. By itself Altruism is only a desire of succor; it can produce nothing; it can only give what others have produced. We are told that "even the most legitimate touch of materialism was wanting in Mrs Gould's character," implying such a purity as to be actually ineffective on the physical Earth. If Charles requires her to humanize his materialist ambitions, she requires him to materialize her humanitarian ones, and perhaps even to frame them to herself: "He was competent," we are told; "he had given a vast shape to the vagueness of her unselfish ambitions."

Also fundamental to the notion of Altruism is a position above the mass it purports to uplift, and several times the novel quietly shows "The First Lady of Sulaco" acting to preserve that position. "Before all things," the narrator warns us tellingly during her engagement, she was "careful of her pride in the object of her choice." Charles' distinctly upper-class appearance suggesting "an officer of cavalry turned gentleman farmer" is

"gratifying to Mrs Gould's tastes," while to her eyes the downtrodden mass whom she purports to save "looked all alike, as if run into the same ancestral mould of suffering and patience." In one humorous moment she is betrayed by the parrot of the Casa Gould, which mimics her voice shouting imperiously for her native servant. At the critical juncture, when she endorses Decoud's plan of counter-revolution, we are told that her motive is to save Charles, but she herself says that she was "corrupted by her fears," and as the altruist unleashes further war upon the land we are at liberty to at least recognize that as goes Charles, so goes the aristocratic position that Altruism craves. In this light it is worth noting our final sight of Mrs Gould, when summoned to Nostromo's deathbed: she is "cloaked and monastically hooded," suggesting an outward affinity with poverty, while concealed under the cloak is a sparkling evening gown.

But the symbolic image that I think best sums up Mrs Gould is her Edenic watercolor of the green San Tomé gorge before the reconstruction of the mine. The painting suggests all the organic sympathy and mourning for lost innocence that characterize her at her best. And yet, we are told that she painted the watercolor "from a cleared patch in the bushes, sitting in the shade of a roof of straw erected for her on three rough poles under Don Pepe's direction." In this image is all of Altruism, managing underlings in the name of saving them, clearing Nature to gain a vantage point from which to love it, enlisting Materialism to create the very shelter that enables her to denounce it.

2. Martin Decoud, Antonia Avellanos and Don José Avellanos

With the exception of his suicide scene, Decoud appears only in Part II, yet so strongly does he dominate the novel in that span -- in plot, voice and theme -- that he emerges as perhaps the main character of the whole. As I argue elsewhere, Nostromo is fundamentally a novel about idealism and the dangers of committing onesself to a great dream. If so, it is Decoud's anti-idealist skepticism that brings all the other dreamers/idealists into focus. Skepticism -- the doctrine that all is meaningingless, illusory and futile -- is the novel's own message, and it is through Decoud's long, losing battle with the dream-ideal that Conrad elocutes his theme most clearly.

I submit that Decoud is, of course, not merely a skeptic but an allegory of Skepticism -- to the extent that his suicide stands as a literary monument to the perils of all true perception. And yet his is a reluctant, waffling skepticism, marked by fits of recidivist idealism in which he acts heroically and effectively and seems a completely different person. Only seems, however; his idealist actions are marked by a wry disparagement, an acknowledgement of their own phoniness. He joins the Ribierist cause as a journalist and comments that "no occupation is serious"; he dedicates himself to Antonia with the words, "I have only the supreme illusion of a lover." It is safe to say that on some level Decoud never quite becomes a sincere idealist; but on the other hand he doesn't quite make it to full skepticism either -- until the very end. The novel suggests to us that both extremes are fatal conditions, and his waffling consists of trying to balance safely between the equal abysses to each side.

The figure of Antonia is at once the most essential allegory of Nostromo and the most obscure, the latter for the simple reason that she herself has no overmastering ideal like the other characters. We are told that she is devoted to her father, Don José Avellanos, but she survives his death with vigor intact and is still going strong at the end of the novel, appearing in Mrs Gould's garden alongside Bishop Corbelan to argue for new causes and new ideals. What Antonia allegorizes is Idealism itself, Idealism divorced from any particular creed or goal, the good fight for the sake of the good fight. This is the key to everything she says and does in the novel. Observe that in her first appearance with Decoud (a childhood flashback) she criticizes him for his detachment, not from any particular cause, but from commitment as such:

On one occasion, as though she had lost all patience, she flew out at him about the aimlessness of his life and the levity of his opinion.

She herself seems devoted to a particular cause, or rather a particular man: she assists and supports her ailing father Don José, and works for his goal of a reformed Costaguana. However, when Decoud complains that patriotism, to him, means an endless round of barbaric carnage, she defends herself in a revealing way:

"But we are labouring to change all that," Antonia protested. "It is exactly what we desire. It is our object. It is the great cause. And the word you despise has stood also for sacrifice, for courage, for constancy, for suffering."

Note that in this impassioned speech, she never says that the Great Goal is actually achievable, only that one must fight for it. More importantly, she derives man's great qualities not from the benevolent future, but from the fight to get there, from the act of "labouring" for change rather the change itself. This is the voice of pure Idealism, defending the redeeming power of the Good Fight as such, regardless of victory, in terms that could apply to any struggle anywhere. The same is true of her lovemaking, when she whispers to Decoud devilishly, "Why should any one of us think his aspirations unrealizable?" Decoud alone will discover the full meaning of this not-so-rhetorical question.

Decoud's back-and-forth affair with Antonia is thus the head-on collision of Skepticism with Idealism. The party caught in the middle is Don José. The romantic triangle concerns Decoud trying to spirit Antonia out of Costaguana once and for all ("to carry her away out of these deadly futilities of pronunciamientos and reforms"), and Antonia resisting due to her devotion to Don José. It is never clear whether she is clinging to the man or the nation, exactly, but Decoud finds himself at rivalry with both. His wooing of Antonia is conducted almost entirely in terms of denouncing patriotism and the realities of Costaguana's national life. Allegorically, his attempt to remove Antonia from Don José's Costaguana is the attempt to peel Idealism away from its long association with the Nation-state.

That Don José Avellanos represents Nationalism is apparent from even a cursory glance at his character -- Nationalism meaning the quest for a moral nation. His fight to civilize Costaguana personifies every fight to make of the Nation-state a benevolent institution. That the cause seems

impossible does not dissuade Don José -- so long as he has Antonia by his side. Allegorically, their relationship is similar to the marriage of Charles and Emily Gould. Just as Materialism requires Altruism if it is to be seen as progressive, Nationalism requires Idealism if it is to be seen as heroic. Antonia's allegiance to Don José stands for the general, worldwide belief that the Nation-state is an ideal worth fighting for, and it is precisely this belief that Decoud is trying to destroy by sundering Antonia from her father/land. In fact the allegorical sundering does take place. Don José and Costaguana die at the same moment, Idealism in the form of Antonia flits to the social agenda of Bishop Corbelan and Hernandez, and the novel ends by portraying a modern world in which Nationalism animates no one, in which all ideals -- the ruling forces of capital, the opposition of labor, and the power of religion -- have moved to the international arena.

That the material interests were international all along forms a developing tension in the novel; they benefit Costaguana but they are using Costaguana, and the day is coming when they will sunder and subsume the nation. "Imperium in imperio," says Don José of the silver mine, in a manner that "seemed to contain a queer admixture of bodily discomfort." The discomfort, of course, applies allegorically to the Nation as well, struggling with the internationalist cancer within. Nostromo even contains the exact moment of transition from Nationalism to the new, international world, in a cloaked scene that can only be fully understood by following the novel's allegorical code.

Charles Gould is accompanying Antonia and the dying Don José partway along the refugee road. When he says to them, "I must leave you now," this loaded line begins the moment when Materialism is now "leaving" the bounds of the idealized Nation. Watch what happens next. At this declaration Antonia "turned her head slowly and uncovered her face," whereupon, having gazed upon what we might call the true face of Idealism, Gould succumbs to a brutal and lasting disillusionment, perceiving the "monstrous illusions" that have exhausted Don José and himself, and awakening to "the cruel futility of things." Idealism, in the person of Antonia, then completes a remarkable transfer of power from the departing Gould to the arriving emissary of Hernandez. "I entreat you," she says to Gould, "to give this man your word that you will accept any arrangement my uncle may make with their chief." The matter at hand is payment for Hernandez' soldiery, but Hernandez stands for social justice, Antonia's uncle stands for crusading religion, and the phrase "any arrangement" is open-ended. "Charles Gould, with only a short hesitation, pronounced the required pledge." What Idealism has really done in its roadside junta is arrange a new structure for the ideals of the modern society to come: as Nationalism lies "vanquished" and Materialism retreats disillusioned, the reins of human hope are passed to the world's new crusades, socialism and religion. Sure enough, when the modern world appears in Nostromo soon afterward we find Bishop Corbelan speaking for the aspiring people with Antonia at his side, a "Protestant invasion" by the Holroyd Missionary Fund underway, "socialistic" societies proliferating, and worker revolts breaking out at the mine. Neither patriotism nor material progress inspire idealistic fervor any longer. Antonia has found new allies; the Good Fight continues in new forms.

There remains Decoud's suicide to consider, one of the most famous and haunting passages in the novel. What conclusions can we draw from it? On the simplest level, one can say that Decoud dies from a true perception of the universe -- in his "utter scepticism" he encounters reality without any saving illusion, as a "succession of incomprehensible images." In Conrad's vision, the naked world is not one which Man can look upon and live. Ideals, though illusory, are the only way to give meaning to our lives. And we may let the suicide stand simply as that terrible equation -- truth equals fatality -- the ultimate statement of a pessimistic worldview and the ultimate indictment of intellect. But there is a further point about the scene that I would like to make.

The mechanics of Decoud's death have seldom been remarked on, and they are curious. He actually commits suicide twice: sitting on the gunwale of the dinghy he first shoots himself with a pistol, then employs ingots of silver to ensure that he sinks. Why does he care to sink, and why does Conrad reserve the highly symbolic silver for only this second death? For the pistol-death, the narrator names Decoud by his social role -- "the lover of Antonia Avellanos rolled overboard" -- while for the sinking-death Decoud receives not only the silver but his true name: "the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace." [Emphasis mine.] Apparently the bodily tumble is meant to be less important thematically than the utter erasure of the character from the earth. I believe this to be Conrad's final and allegorical comment on Skepticism, the ideal of non-ideals and the philosophy of negation: loosed against the fallacies of the external world, such as patriotism, it must end by turning against those of the inner world, such as identity, and negate the self to nothing. At the beginning of Decoud's solitude on the island we are told that he dies from "want of faith in himself and others," but want of faith in others is an endemic condition in the novel, affecting Monygham, Charles Gould after his disillusionment, Nostromo as concerns the rich, even Father Roman. Those characters survive. With Decoud it is the self which is under attack, and the passages on his solitude consist of a long, losing battle to retain his "individuality," finally ending when he realizes that Antonia could never have loved "a being so impalpable as himself." At that point he rows out to his oblivion. Skepticism has erased itself; the soul that Antonia tried to save through patriotic commitment has "disappeared without a trace."

3. Giorgio Viola, Teresa Viola, and Nostromo

With the characters I have described so far, the allegorical shadows they cast merely expand or generalize a meaning already accessible to the reader. But I venture to say that without understanding the allegory of its title character, one would be unable to make sense of the novel's final third; everything from Chapter 3-8 on would appear belabored, redundant, or flat-out inexplicable.

Nostromo is the personification of "the People," meaning essentially the working class. He represents the mass of laboring mankind who are the victims of every crusading ideology and who nevertheless supply their muscle. He is the "Capataz de Cargadores" (chief cargo-bearer), the "universal factotum," the "faithful." His very name means "our man" -- it derives from Captain Mitchell's mispronunciation of nostro uomo -- casting

him exclusively as a possession and specifically as a possession of the material interests. His various names -- Nostromo, Capataz, Gian' Battista, Juan -- are all imposed upon him by others ("Gian' Battista," or John the Baptist, contains within it the very ceremony of naming) signifying that in speech as well as action he is the one to whom things are done, the great Exploited, the narratee of history. And Nostromo's story functions as the allegorical tale of the working class passing through socio-political disillusionment and emerging into the consciousness of itself as Labor in the modern world of the material interests.

Let us consider Nostromo first in relation to his adopted Costaguana parents, Giorgio and Teresa Viola. Nostromo himself is an orphan, which feels allegorically correct since the People are descended from no institution. (A glimpse of his early life, where he was "habitually and severely beaten" by an employer who "had cheated him out of his orphan's inheritance," has the tang of history, suggesting the People's long-ago first subjugation by society). In his surrogate parents the Violas, however, Conrad has given him an explosive pair of liberation philosophies, which contest for his soul as bitterly as in any love triangle.

Giorgio, one of the first characters to be introduced, is also one of the clearest allegories, as if Conrad inserted him as a teaching example. Fanatically devoted to Garibaldi and the cause of Liberty, he even physically resembles Garibaldi, and his ideals have a powerful influence on Nostromo when the crisis comes:

What he had heard Giorgio Viola say once was very true. Kings, ministers, aristocrats, the rich in general, kept the people in poverty and subjection; they kept them as they kept dogs, to fight and hunt for their service.

Giorgio's Liberty is of the classic Enlightenment-era Republican variety: he believes in the freedom of the People through a society of just laws and shared duties. "Duty" is a catchword for him, always said approvingly. For example, when Teresa complains of Nostromo's absence he retorts, "Peace, woman! Where's the sense of it? There's his duty." Giorgio's is a spartan and exacting Liberty in which, as long as Kings are absent, duty to society is not only expected but required.

Teresa, Nostromo's foster mother, takes the opposite approach: she desires to liberate him from the larger society, or more specifically from his own naive dedication to it. Her aim in life is to have Nostromo provide materially for her children, and she sees Nostromo's dedication to society as a vain and wasteful folly. "They have been paying you with words," she tells him from her deathbed, and her advice to him is to "get something for yourself out of it...get riches at least for once." But her last cry, dying from shock at the sound of a gunshot in Giorgio's symbolic house, is "The children, Gian' Battista! Save the children," signifying an appeal to the laboring class to provide not for itself but for the future generations of the earth. Teresa, we may say, represents the enormous material exasperation with poverty, an impatience with the earth's

productive class for doing anything other than providing for the earth's children.

Together, Giorgio and Teresa represent something like the spiritual and material promise of America for the People: Liberty on the one hand, material enrichment on the other. This is yet another instance, however, of one allegory depending on another. When Teresa dies, Giorgio "discovered all the extent of his dependence upon the silenced voice of that woman," implying that Liberty requires a "wife" of Material Benefit in order to function as a living ideal. Though the ideal itself is spartan and based on social duty, its only lasting appeal to the people is the promise that they will get some physical wealth out of it (which, the modern world arguably proves, they won't). To Giorgio's reiterated focus on "Duty," Teresa responds, "Eh! I have no patience," and indeed she dies without seeing Nostromo or her children -- or, by extension, the People -- enriched. When the grieving Giorgio reflects that "no call from him would ever again evoke the answer of her voice," it can be read as the ultimate death of the Republican ideal, in which the "call" of Liberty no longer inspires hope of material enrichment. In the final phase of the book Giorgio has become an anachronism, an "old revolutionist" who "would have understood nothing" of the speeches of the photographer who represents the new, anti-capitalist guard. This guard is concerned specifically with enrichment. "'Let them beware, then, lest the people, prevented from their aspirations, should rise and claim their share of the wealth," warns Bishop Corbelan, while the photographer wheedles Nostromo on his deathbed: "Do not forget that we want money for our work. The rich must be fought with their own weapons." The world has moved on, and the People now place their material prospects in Socialism, i.e., in the overthrow of the Republic.

Nostromo is caught, then, between Giorgio urging him to "duty" and Teresa urging him to, essentially, an open break with those who exploit him. His career in the novel prior to his adventure with the silver represents the halcyon days of the People's innocent allegiance to their taskmasters. "Nobody had ever heard of labour troubles then," the narrator tells us, and indeed we see Nostromo as the willing People in the abstract, appearing everywhere, doing everything. He runs the wharf, he leads the force that defends the harbor from the rioting mob, he is the camp-master for the railway laborers on the mountainside, he escorts Sir John on the dangerous trip down the mountain, he breaks up a ring of thieves that threatens the rail line, he guards the silver in the Custom House by night, he saves the life of the endangered dictator Ribiera, he organizes the embarkation of troops to sail out for the Monterist war, he is the wartime messenger to the bandit Hernandez. He does all this -- and what does he desire in exchange? Merely fame. Nostromo has fashioned for himself an ideal of Reputation. "To be well spoken of. Si, señor," is his stated goal, or, as Teresa puts is, to receive "praise from strangers." Decoud dissects him as a man of "overweening vanity." Nostromo has no higher cause or desire for power, no ambition to become a taskmaster himself (except among the People), no notion of doing anything to upset his perfect fidelity, which goes out as work and returns as trust. This is what we may call the early mode of the People's relationship with the Rulers.

The crisis in this relationship comes after Nostromo is sent with Decoud on the mission to save the silver by night. After leaving Decoud and the silver on the Great Isabel, he returns to Sulaco alone and passes a day asleep at the ruined fort. Upon awakening, he experiences the breach with society in the famous passage suggesting a fall from innocence:

Handsome, robust, and supple, he threw back his head, flung his arms open, and stretched himself with a slow twist of the waist and a leisurely growling yawn of white teeth, as natural and free from evil in the moment of waking as a magnificent and unconscious wild beast. Then, in the suddenly steadied glance fixed upon nothing from under a thoughtful frown, appeared the man.

The Monterists hold the town, and having helped the Ribierist party Nostromo is now a marked man and a fugitive. But Conrad uses the situation allegorically to evoke the People's total alienation from society, the end of their trust in the Rulers as such. The breach causes disillusion: it "made everything that had gone before for years appear vain and foolish, like a flattering dream come suddenly to an end." And it awakens Nostromo specifically to his status as the Exploited: "There is no mistake. They keep us and encourage us as if we were dogs born to fight and hunt for them."

There follows an extraordinary allegorical journey in which Labor wanders at night, contemplating its options in light of its awakened knowledge. First, we pass a lonely old Indian who "lived without a woman in an open shed, with a perpetual fire of dry sticks"; this represents the option of leaving society altogether and returning to the level of primitive Man. But if this option is unattractive, so too is the idea of returning to society, which appears now before us in the form of a faceless army moving at night, the men so oppressed and dehumanized that they seem mere "dark, shifting patches." The awakened People can neither leave society, nor return to it. They are as yet too innocent for the socialist solution, the notion of living in but secretly opposed to society. Not knowing where to go, and homeless as it were, Nostromo ends up in the unfinished Custom House (symbolic of the unformed social "customs" waiting on his decision), where he encounters Dr. Monygham and undergoes the final trial of his passage.

The scene that follows is an entertaining illustration of two subjective natures talking at cross purposes, but on the surface it seems to have little effect on the story. Monygham tries to enlist Nostromo to make the dangerous ride to Cayta on which depends the fate of Sulaco; Nostromo is reluctant to resume his old service and he resists, resists, resists -- then finally gives in. What, then, of his change of heart? The dialogue takes up most of two chapters, and is probably responsible for Guerard's complaint that the Custom House "dominates and disrupts two hundred pages" of the novel, signifying the fatigue of Conrad's imagination. I submit, however, that the only way to appreciate the scene is to follow it on the allegorical level, where we find it to be a parable of the outcast People finally embracing the notion of socialism. Nostromo's ride to Cayta in no way signals a return to his former servitude; rather, it represents the People tempted back into society on the basis of a dark new agenda, the socialist one, that solves their dilemma with the notion of duplicity: of

outwardly laboring for society as before, while secretly plotting their liberation from it.

The first thing to note about the scene is the sinister and epic frame Conrad sets up for it, using among other things the presence of the slain Hirsch and the repeated references to Monygham as the Devil. ("The king of the devils himself," Nostromo says in one of many hints, "has sent you out of this town of cowards and talkers to meet me tonight of all the nights of my life.") Indeed, the allegorical collision of Cynicism and the innocent People can be read as an encounter between Devil and Worker over the fate of the shattered society. Certainly it is made clear that only Nostromo's work can save the country. "You, to speak plainly, are the only man," Monygham tells him, but the novel is not quite speaking plainly when it regales us with this highly allegorical paean to the "indispensable" People:

At this supremely critical point of Sulaco's fortunes it was borne upon him at last that this man was really indispensable, more indispensable than ever the infatuation of Captain Mitchell, his proud discoverer, could conceive; far beyond what Decoud's best dry raillery about 'my illustrious friend, the unique Capataz de Cargadores', had ever intended. The fellow was unique. He was not 'one in a thousand'. He was absolutely the only one. The doctor surrendered. There was something in the genius of that Genoese seaman which dominated in the destinies of great enterprises and of many people . . .

Only the People, in other words, can rebuild society; the whole structure rests on their labor; without their participation all is lost. But the People have made the breach. They have been awakened to their exploitation and they will not resume it:

In the dark Nostromo bit his lip. He had heard enough of that. He knew what that meant. No more of that for him. But he had to look after himself now, he thought.

And this is the People's dilemma: the desire to be independent of society's exploitation, and yet remain in society, to advance their own welfare. Monygham eventually corners him on precisely those terms:

The choice was between accepting the mission to Barrios, with all its dangers and difficulties, and leaving Sulaco by stealth, ingloriously, in poverty.

In allegorical terms, this is the Devil's ultimatum: the People may either labor for society in the old way, or have no role in society at all.

The struggle turns on the silver, which Monygham believes lost and Nostromo alone knows to be hidden on the Great Isabel. He hasn't quite stolen it yet, but he is beginning to be protective of it, just as he is beginning to be protective of himself as the ever-"betrayed" party. Indeed, we can watch the narrative start to blur the treasure and his soul together. When Monygham reveals that Sotillo thinks the silver lost at sea, Nostromo responds enigmatically, "I told you well, Senor Doctor, that Sotillo did not know everything. He did not know I was not dead." Earlier,

we are told that Nostromo "had made up his mind that the treasure should not be betrayed," a statement that echoes his own mounting sense of "betrayal."

Allegorically, Nostromo's secret treasure represents the People's independent worth, their inherent dignity and power, separate from society's empty praise and inevitable exploitation. In stark contrast to this is Monygham's illusory silver, the tool to deceive and steer Sotillo. This is the social illusion, cynically exposed and worthy of the Devil himself; it stands for every false, shining, never-to-be-had ideal dangled in front of men to drive them mad. It is everything that the People have recognized and rejected in their own relationship to society. But it is also their way out. When Monygham suggests sending Sotillo to the Great Isabel on the quest for the false silver, Nostromo is trapped -- and at that moment he finds the solution. In order to keep Monygham off the Great Isabel, he suggests an alternate hiding place, in shallow water, where the false treasure might be searched for endlessly and never found. Allegorically, this is an immense move: the People have made compact with the Devil and are participating in the social deception. All at once Nostromo is free to accept the ride to Cayta, as if the two plans are one and the same, as they are. Perpetuating the social illusion of the false silver is exactly equivalent to saving Sulaco while keeping the true silver secret.

Here, concealed in Conrad's allegory, the People have found the socialist solution. Nostromo's ride to Cayta is neither the fidelity of before, nor is it the abandonment of society. It is something new. And what can we call it but outward support of society (even rescue of society) covering a secret hoard of independent worth and secret dreams of freedom from exploitation? This is socialism in all but name, and Nostromo even inaugurates it with a vow to see the oppressed classes "avenged." The avowal is directed at Hirsch, and the revolt is made in Teresa's name:

'You man of fear!' he cried. 'You shall be avenged by me -- Nostromo. Out of my way, doctor! Stand aside -- or, by the suffering soul of a woman dead without confession, I will strangle you with my two hands.'

With that declaration, their compact made, the People now quit the symbolic Custom House. But the progression is not quite complete. It remains for the duplicitous Worker to slink back into Giorgio's symbolic house of Republican unity (the "Albergo d'Italia Una"). This wonderful scene is pervaded by a sense of darkness and guilt that becomes much more powerful on the allegorical level:

Step by step Nostromo approached the Albergo d'Italia Una, which he had never known so lightless, so silent, before. The door, all black in the pale wall, stood open as he had left it twenty-four hours before, when he had nothing to hide from the world.

Once inside it, Nostromo appears "a ruined and sinister Capataz," barricading the windows and "violently" demanding food of his landlord. And yet, he is heard to plaintively ask the blessing of the old Protector of the People in his new endeavor, and worry aloud that by following Teresa's directive to "save the children," he is thereby taking up her

curse of "poverty, misery, starvation." As the rest of the novel makes clear, the price of his epic compact is no less than his soul.

Well, he had saved the children. He had defeated the spell of poverty and starvation. He had done it all alone -- or perhaps helped by the devil.

Nostromo is not a socialist novel per se. It offers no support for supposedly workable methodologies like Communism, Social Democracy, etc. Conrad's portrayal of the People's turn to class-consciousness is steeped in a sense of tragedy, of a fall from innocence into deceit and unachievable ambition. The independent freedom that the People seek never quite comes about, and the novel suggests that it is not, in the end, possible, making their knowledge of exploitation as much curse as truth. Is the Worker better or worse off for his encounter with the Devil? In the last moment of his life, Nostromo is asked whether Dr Monygham is "a dangerous enemy of the people." His only answer is "a glance of enigmatic and profound inquiry."

4. Nostromo, Linda and Giselle

The ending of Nostromo, comprising its last three chapters, has been perhaps the most heavily criticized, even disparaged, piece of writing among Conrad's major works. Opinions have been voiced to the effect that Conrad burned out from fatigue, and I actually have in hand a Penguin Classics paperback of the novel, in which new Conrad readers may be informed by the Martin Seymour-Smith introduction that "the ending is more or less universally found to be unsatisfactory." For myself, it's phrases like "more or less universally" that I find unsatisfactory, but I do admit that Nostromo's final section offers the greatest challenge to the reader. And once again, full understanding depends on being able to read at the allegorical level. When decoded, the ending stands revealed as the indispensable thematic capstone of the novel.

The difficulty begins at the beginning of Chapter 3-11, where we encounter an abrupt shift in subject and tone. The socio-political consciousness and stylistic experimentation that have brought us this far are gone, replaced by what appears to be a sort of moralistic soap opera about the perils of love and money, set years in the future, told in a straightforward and even sentimental voice. Here is the plot in brief. Outwardly, Nostromo has become the successful Captain Fidanza, owner of a coastal trading schooner, but secretly his wealth comes from his occasional visits to the Great Isabel, where he lifts a few bars of silver by night. He has become the slave of the silver. Giorgio Viola and his two daughters live alone on the Great Isabel without knowing what lies in the ravine or what goes on there at night. Nostromo becomes formally engaged to marry the dark-haired Linda, but he is secretly in love with the fair Giselle, and promises to elope with her. But he fatally prolongs the situation for the sake of purloining ever more silver from his hoard.

The first thing to note about the section is the strong connection drawn between Nostromo's life and the seething labor movement that dominates the background of the future Occidental Republic. Nostromo himself financially supports the movement; he is their "great man"; they look to him "for strength, for the necessary force." The character most associated with the movement, the radical photographer, is permitted by Conrad to have the

last word at Nostromo's deathbed. Simultaneous with Nostromo's death comes the outbreak of actual labor unrest at the mine, "Some trouble with the workmen to be feared," according to Basilio. All this reflects the ongoing allegory of Nostromo as the People, now awakened to their exploitation -- as goes he, so goes the populace. But there is a deeper connection, in that both Nostromo and the movement must live secret lives. The "socialistic" workers meet in "secret societies, camorras, and such-like" according to Captain Mitchell. The narrator introduces the movement by saying that Sulaco is growing rich on "the labouring hands of the people," but that "other changes more subtle, outwardly unmarked, affected the minds and hearts of the workers" (emphasis mine). Compare this with Nostromo, for whom "his courage, his magnificence, his leisure, his work, everything was as before, only everything was a sham." In both cases, the People are described as giving "work" to society as before, while, "outwardly unmarked," they lead a "secret" life of unlawful ambition. As before, then, we find the image of the socialist worker portrayed as not yet in open revolt, but as leading a duplicitous life where outward allegiance to society covers secret dreams of transcendence.

Transcendence is precisely the word to describe Nostromo's ambitions with the hidden silver. Originally his anger was directed against the rich and the "hombres finos -- the gentlemen," and his ambition was to "grow rich slowly," but by Chapter 3-12 the silver has come to mean something more to him: it is

the secret of his safety, of his influence, of his magnificence, of his power over the future, of his defiance of ill-luck, of every possible betrayal from rich and poor alike.

On the surface, the language reflects his growing slavery to the silver, his increasingly insatiable obsession. But allegorically, we must read the People's goal of "safety" as "safety from exploitation," and note that his field of possible betrayers has expanded to include all mankind and even "ill-luck." What the People are seeking here is the end of exploitation as such. Socialism, in this vision, is not a project to establish some new form or structure of government; it is a desire, an insatiable desire, to transcend the old realities entirely and achieve a realm in which one is powerful, magnificent, and safe from everything. It is the desire for utopia.

Along those lines, it is crucial to distingtuish Nostromo's actual attitude toward the socialist plotters of Sulaco. Certainly he is on their side when he turns his powerful frown on the San Tomé mountain, representing oppressive capitalist society (it is described in no uncertain terms as "hanging over the Campo, over the whole land, feared, hated, wealthy; more soulless than any tyrant, more pitiless and autocratic than the worst Government; ready to crush innumerable lives in the expansion of its greatness"). Yet, significantly, he turns the same frown on the president of the radical society, the unsavory character described as

an indigent, sickly, somewhat hunchbacked little photographer, with a white face and a magnanimous soul dyed crimson by a bloodthirsty hate of all capitalists, oppressors of the two hemispheres.

In his combination of magnanimity and bloodthirst this figure is no different from the capitalist Holroyd of whom he is the negative print. When he speaks we are told that Nostromo "listened, frowning with his mind far away, and walked off unapproachable, silent, like a man full of cares." One gets the feeling that despite their socialist duplicity the People are still innocent at heart, disliking equally the prospect of violence on either side. "He had kept the treasure for purposes of revenge," we are told, "but now he cared nothing for it." The strong implication is, again, one of transcendence -- yes, the People are opposed to the exploitations of the capitalist rich, but what they seek is not so much bloody redress but a world free from conquest and hate in any form.

This is the key to the section. Supposedly, according to Marxism, such a world waits for us at the end of the long historical road. And such a world would comprise, of course, the end of politics -- the end of nations, of conquest, of class exploitation, of class divisions as such. Inasmuch as Nostromo is a novel about politics, the portrayal of the attempt to reach this world is its essential culmination and thematically its most important section. The very placement of the section emphasizes its focus on transcendance: it is the only part of the novel that lies outside its recursive timeshifts, i.e., beyond the "present tense" of Captain Mitchell's introduction in Chapter 1-2, to which he returned us in Chapter 3-10. Now Mitchell is long since retired; we are in an undefined distant future completely unreferenced by the preceding text. And the tonal switch at this point from political irony to love story is deliberate, a thematic switch reflecting mankind's attempt to transcend politics for a world based on universal love.

Let us turn to Linda and Giselle.

Nostromo's love triangle mirrors his relation to the outer society. If, in his relation to the world, "everything was as before, only everything was a sham," the same holds true of his engagement to Linda. "Nothing is changed," Linda sighs happily when they are first engaged. "I was yours ever since I can remember." Indeed, Linda is Nostromo's long-expected fiancée, so expected that during the proposal, when Nostromo hesitates to pronounce Giselle's name, Giorgio Viola instantly supplies Linda's, committing him to the engagement without his voiced consent. Nor does he break the engagement, but prolongs it silently, lovelessly, and endlessly, until Linda complains, "I shall go grey, I fear, before the ring is on my finger." In a similar vein comes Captain Mitchell's plaint, "When are you going to take hold again, Nostromo? There will be plenty of work for the cargadores presently." Eventually the public Nostromo takes on the respectable but false career of a coasting captain, while in private he is "coasting" just as much in his respectable, false engagement to Linda.

The parallels between Linda and the larger society go deeper. She is associated with Giorgio in oddly political ways; she is the "true daughter of the austere republican," while Giselle is "the unworthy daughter of old Viola, the immaculate republican." It is Linda who receives Giorgio's highest accolade when she goes to work: "Si, si -- to your duty." She is the embodiment of conflict and politics, "all fire and words," and judgement, "gloom and scorn." She is also obliquely associated with

property: she is the "keeper" of the light, which is described as a "shrine of diamonds," and her declaration of love is made entirely in the language of ownership, hierarchy and control:

I was yours ever since I can remember. I had only to think of you for the earth to become empty to my eyes. When you were there, I could see no one else. I was yours. Nothing is changed. The world belongs to you, and you let me live in it.

Linda is thus an allegory for the traditional, lawful and even exploiting society that the People must resist. In contrast, Giselle is the utopia of love they are trying to achieve. Giselle represents a world without ambition by having no ambition herself; she represents a world of peace by being an instinctive pacifist, averse to every form of conflict. "She was afraid of pain, of bodily harm, of sharp words, of facing anger, and witnessing violence." She is utterly sincere and without guile: "Her soul was light and tender with a pagan sincerity in its impulses." In her the mouth, heretofore the fount of deadly political speech, is "made for love and kisses." She appears oblivious to concepts of property: when Nostromo admits to her that he is a thief, her response is simply, "I love you!" Though a creature of love, she is thoroughly incapable of possessiveness, smiling equally upon the handsome Ramirez and the crabbed Dr Monygham and prompting the latter to exclaim, "I dare say she would make eyes at anybody." Even her love for Nostromo has no jealousy or possession in it, only a helpless impatience as of the utopia waiting to be embraced.

(The name Giselle, deriving from the 19th Century ballet by Théophile Gautier, is particularly appropriate. In addition to the specific parallels of a girl contested by two lovers, one of whom is betrothed to another, there is the allegorical parallel in which Giselle is a beautiful and undying spirit that, despite its best intentions, causes men to dance away their lives -- an apt description of the idea of utopian socialism.)

The socialist Worker's dilemma is that, order to reach the utopian world, he must remain "engaged" to the exploitative society, at least formally. It is an exercise in presenting a duplicitous front, represented by Nostromo's "sham" life as Captain Fidanza, which covers a long-term campaign of gradual reform, represented by his need to "grow rich slowly." Nostromo's secret affair with Giselle mirrors his relationship with the silver: forbidden to claim the prize outright, he plunders a little whenever he can, all the while looking ahead to a distant someday when the full happiness shall be his.

Can the utopian day ever come? Even before Nostromo's death we receive hints otherwise. For all Giselle's attractiveness, Linda is the practical one, the one who performs household chores while the dreamy sister reclines outdoors embroidering. The implication is that law and property are the eminently practical responses to a world of conflict, and Conrad does not quite suggest that this world can be transcended. When Giselle reponds "I love you!" to Nostromo's confession of theft, obliterating the restrictions of property with the force of love, the narrator says that Nostromo feels "an unwonted sense of freedom" (italics mine). Nostromo's affair with Giselle is described in the language of the unreal or impossible, a fairy-tale; they will live "far away in a white palace upon

a hill above a blue sea." As he says to her, in a line with hidden political overtones, "There is something that stands between us two and the freedom of the world." That something is wealth, and the endless necessity for it in the practical, cynical world that refuses to die.

Indeed, the prototypical earthly man can envision the utopian future only in terms of physical wealth. Nostromo promises her

a white palace above a blue sea. He would keep her there like a jewel in a casket. He would get land for her -- her own land fertile with vines and corn -- to set her little feet upon.

One can read this imagery to indicate a future world in which the People and their bride have ownership of all the rich, fertile earth. And yet, it is still ownership. "Give up the palazzo, Giovanni, and the vineyard on the hills, for which we are starving our love," his utopia pleads. He cannot.

In the end, however, I believe that Nostromo succeeds in making the final passage to the world of love. Mortally wounded by Giorgio in a case of mistaken identity (itself evilly symbolic of the Republic's vengeance on those who try to transcend it), the dying Capataz is brought ashore, where he is visited by Mrs Gould. There he tells her that "there is something accursed in wealth," and in the same breath makes her an offer:

Señora, shall I tell you where the treasure is? To you alone. . . . Shining! Incorruptible!'

A pained, involuntary reluctance lingered in his tone, in his eyes, plain to the woman with the genius of sympathetic intuition. She averted her glance from the miserable subjection of the dying man, appalled, wishing to hear no more of the silver.

'No, Capataz,' she said. 'No one misses it now. Let it be lost for ever.'

Is it too much to suggest that a miscommunication occurs here, that when Nostromo says "the treasure" and Mrs Gould hears "the silver," something has been missed? And is it reasonable to assume that Nostromo would offer Mrs Gould the wealth that he has just pronounced "accursed?" It seems far more likely that this exchange represents the 'X' on the treasure map of the whole novel, and that under the surface Nostromo is offering Mrs Gould the "treasure" of his final wisdom, of his final rejection of wealth in favor of the true treasure -- love. Whereupon Mrs Gould, attempting to resist wealth herself although she is "wealthy beyond great dreams of wealth," inadvertently rejects wisdom, and the ruined woman who once embodied Love winds up implying that love has no place in the world of the material interests.

Nostromo's last word, quoted above, is "Incorruptible," a word applied equally throughout the novel to the silver and the man. The implication is that for all the duplicity and tragedy of their socialist career, the People remain unstained in heart, and that what is really "Incorruptible" is their yearning for a better world. Indeed, it is only with Nostromo's mortal wound that labor unrest breaks out into the open at the mine, as if

the next phase of open violent revolt belongs to a different generation of the People, less innocent, or less troubled by the fall from innocence. But even then, the desire for a better world goes on; it continues in the hearts of the exploited just as the silver of independent worth continues at the base of Linda's lighthouse. The better world may be a long time coming, and it may be that the true treasure of love will never emerge into a society shaped for it. But in our moments of doubt we may hear the ghostly words of the Capataz upon its burial: "Always remember, señor . . . that this treasure may be left safely here for hundreds of years. Time is on its side, señor. And silver is an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value forever."

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